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--Hispanic lawmakers question absence of immigration in Dem agenda  
*The Hill, 9/14/06*

## [Hispanic lawmakers question absence of immigration in new Dem agenda](#)

By Alexander Bolton  
The Hill

House Democratic leaders passed around to colleagues Tuesday a plan they would focus on if their party wins control of the lower chamber on Election Day, but although the document was drafted to achieve consensus, it has already angered Democratic Hispanic leaders.

The cause of the consternation is not something the Democrats included in the agenda. Instead, it's something lacking: any mention of immigration. While Republican candidates around the country are trying to make immigration one of the biggest issues of this fall's elections, Democrats appear to be tiptoeing around it.

Some Democrats fear that the issue will hurt them in conservative-leaning districts such as in Ohio, Indiana and Kentucky that they must win in order to capture majority control this November.

At a closed-door meeting of the Democratic Steering & Policy Committee on Tuesday, New York Rep. José Serrano, the panel's vice chairman, challenged Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi (Calif.) over the lack of any mention of immigration reform in the caucus's new 25-page agenda document for 2007. The confrontation created a tense moment in the room, said one participant.

Other Democrats agree with Serrano that their party should make known its position on an issue important to Hispanic voters, whom many political strategists believe will be a crucial voting bloc in the future because of their surging numbers.

"I think immigration is a big issue," said Rep. Loretta Sanchez (D-Calif.), a member of the Congressional Hispanic Caucus. "It's a big issue to the Hispanic community. They deserve some sort of answer on where the Democrats are on immigration."

"Mr. Serrano believes the book reflects a plan for the Democrats of the future," said Sanchez, referring to the agenda document "A New Direction for America," which leaders distributed at Tuesday's meeting. The document resembles the Contract with America that Republicans used to define their priorities before going on to win the House in 1994.

"[Serrano] wanted a plan about immigration in there, [or] maybe just a note that immigrants are important to the country," she added.

Sanchez, a member of the steering and policy committee said she missed the meeting but heard about it from other members.

Serrano said that while many of the immigrants who would benefit from reform cannot vote, Hispanic citizens who do vote perceive attacks on immigrants as attacks on their heritage. Serrano said it is important that Democrats show they care about immigrants.

"We have to let people like me who are citizens know that we're not ignoring the others," he said, adding that any token of recognition would be important.

The new Democratic agenda addresses border security — which House Republicans made the focus of their controversial immigration reform bill — but it makes no mention of immigration policy.

Instead, space is devoted to other issues such as homeland security, energy independence, a "GI Bill of Rights," global warming, biofuels, broadband access for all Americans and lobbying reform. While homeland security has been a hot topic this election season, broadband access has not received much attention on the campaign trail.

"I'm very sad and disappointed that comprehensive immigration reform is not a key and pivotal point for the Democrats," said Rep. Luis Gutierrez (D-Ill.), who heads the Hispanic caucus's immigration reform task force.

Rep. Grace Napolitano (D-Calif.), the Hispanic caucus chairwoman, said she was not familiar with the new agenda document but that she would follow up on the concern expressed by Gutierrez and others. She said that the Hispanic caucus was "100 percent" unified behind the view that there needs to be comprehensive immigration reform.

"I can't give you a reason for why they have not been inclusive," said Napolitano of Democratic leaders' elevation of other issues. "I think they know it's a big issue. It will continue to be a big issue."

Several Democratic members of the steering and policy panel said that immigration was not included in the agenda because it was intended to be a "consensus document."

"What's in that document are things that there is absolute agreement on," said Rep. Dennis Cardoza (D-Calif.), another member of the Hispanic caucus.

But the agenda includes a statement on the Iraq war, an issue that has divided Democrats since Congress voted to authorize the use of force in 2002.

Cardoza countered that Democrats all agree on the statement in the agenda, which promises that Democrats will "ensure 2006 is a year of significant transition to full Iraqi sovereignty, with the Iraqis assuming primary responsibility for securing and governing their country and with the responsible redeployment of U.S. forces."

Rep. George Miller (D-Calif.), a top lieutenant to Pelosi who serves as the policy co-chairman of the steering and policy committee, said there are important issues that were not included in the agenda. But Miller acknowledged that he could not quickly think of one that rises to the same level as immigration.

Jen Crider, Pelosi's spokeswoman, noted that there will be a large summit of Hispanic leaders in Washington later this month and that Democrats would unveil an agenda for it entitled, "A New Direction for Hispanic Families."

"A New Direction for America is where the Democrats will begin next Congress," said Crider, who described the agenda as a starting point, not an exhaustive list of what they will tackle.

Simon Rosenberg, president of the New Democrat Network, a political advocacy organization that has spent millions on drawing Hispanic voters into the Democratic Party fold, defended the Democratic record on immigration. Still, he chided leaders for their omission.

"Given how much energy and time Democrats have put into trying to pass comprehensive immigration reform, it's unfortunate that immigration hasn't made it into the document, because the party has made it a priority," said Rosenberg.

Rosenberg urged Democrats not to run away from the issue of immigration, vowing that it's a debate they will win over Republicans, many of whom are focusing exclusively on a tough law-and-order approach to illegal immigration.

Rosenberg predicted that some Democrats would spend a lot of money highlighting immigration this fall.

"We're going to see a lot of back-and-forth in paid media on immigration," he said. "We have nothing to fear. We have a plan to solve the problem and [the Republicans] don't."

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